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SUBJECT: THE LINES AND BEARDS GET LONGER AT THE ARAB BOOK EXHIBITION

1. Summary: The 29th Arab Book Fair reflected a continued trend of the gradual Islamization of the annual exhibition. A noticeable increase in Islamic religious books, shoppers, and booksellers highlighted the fair, where the majority of participants and shoppers were rural conservative Muslims. Some urban, moderate Kuwaitis increasingly shied away from the event and some liberal contacts described the event as a waste of time. Nonetheless, Washington-produced Arabic texts sold well at the U.S. Embassy's book fair stall. End Summary.

2. The 29th Arab Book Fair was held from November 23 - December 3. Twenty-five countries took part in the exhibition, displaying over 90,000 books, mostly in Arabic, although there were a limited number of English-language books available. The opening was presided over by Information Minister Mohammed Abulhassan. (Note: The Information Minister is likely to be the next minister to face a parliamentary grilling. Members of the Salafi Movement, a.k.a. Scientific Salafis, are attacking him on numerous charges including irregularities in the Ministry, permitting indecent concerts and inappropriate television programming, and general promotion of moral corruption. End Note.)

3. Over the past five years, the tone of the book fair has become increasingly more religious. The majority of patrons this year were bearded Kuwaiti men and fully-veiled Kuwaiti women. The majority of the bookshops and publishers taking part in the exhibition, particularly the Kuwaiti participants, reflected conservative religious ideologies. Most books covered traditional and historical issues such as the life of Prophet Mohammed, the spread of Islam, and Islamic life issues and rituals. Analytical books about the Islamic groups and movements were not seen. (Comment: This is almost certainly because of the growing influence of the Islamist groups in Kuwait. A few years ago, Islamist MPs grilled Shaykh Saud Nasser Al-Sabah, then Information Minister, because some of the books at a previous fair were perceived to be contrary to Islamic values. End Comment.) Many shoppers filled their shopping carts with lower-quality religious books which are sold at bargain prices. The fair is viewed by rural bedouin and Islamists as a day out for the family. Kids can "play" in the shopping carts and cheap books on Islam are plentiful. As a result, most urban Kuwaitis increasingly avoid the book exhibition. (Comment: Several liberal post contacts described the event as a waste of time, the Islamic experts as "hacks," and commented that many Kuwaitis never read their purchased books, instead using them as home decor. End Comment.)

4. New this year was a display of modern and professionally published English-language children's books on Islam. In place of music played on the traditional oud, an Arab mandolin, it was agreed that there would be only readings from the Qur'an to accentuate the mood at the fair -- a widely understood concession to the Islamists -- and workers at one booth handed out free informational CDs in support of Palestinian political causes. Some of the many non-Islamic books to be found included interpretation of dreams, hypnotism, cooking, general fiction, and technical and computer-related reference books. There were also books on astrology, a topic growing in popularity among Arab women, and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a technique for personal self-improvement and societal betterment that is gaining many adherents in the Arab world, especially among Islamists.

5. The U.S. Embassy stall, adorned with red, white, and blue bunting, did brisk business. Embassy staff working the event sold approximately 400 books, in Arabic and English, on a variety of topics including: U.S. politics, history, and culture as well as English-language instruction. Especially popular was an Arabic-language book about the boxer Muhammad Ali and texts about the U.S. legal system, both of which sold out. Arabic-speaking participants also purchased Arabic-language texts on U.S. history, government, and the electoral process, and expressed a desire to have more, and more modern, texts for learning English.

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